DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 589 CS 511 842

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TITLE	How Do We Know We're Doing It Right? Assessing Outcomes in Core Business Communications Courses.
PUB DATE	2002-10-00
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Business Communication (67th, Cincinnati, OH, October 23-26, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Business Communication; Course Evaluation; Curriculum Development; Higher Education; *Instructional Effectiveness; Instructional Improvement; *Outcomes of Education; *Portfolio Assessment; *Portfolios (Background Materials)

ABSTRACT

Outcomes assessment is increasingly important to regional accrediting agencies, which are requiring self-study reports to not only analyze the outcomes assessment efforts, but also use assessment results to improve programs. This paper illustrates the process in a university-wide required business communications course by discussing the problems of setting standards, enlisting faculty support, and establishing a consistent portfolio rating system. Handouts of the exit standards, rubrics, and assessment results are attached. (Author/RS)

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How Do We Know We're Doing It Right? Assessing Outcomes in Core Business Communications Courses

A Presentation for the 67th Annual Convention of ABC
Cincinnati, Ohio
October 23-26, 2002

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Abstract

Outcomes assessment is increasingly important to regional accrediting agencies, which are requiring self-study reports to not only analyze the outcomes assessment efforts but also use assessment results to improve programs. My presentation will illustrate the process in a university-wide required business communications course by discussing the problems of setting standards, enlisting faculty support, and establishing a consistent portfolio rating system. Attendees will receive handouts of the exit standards, rubrics, and assessment results.

Presentation Description

Outcomes assessment is increasingly important to regional accrediting agencies, which are requiring self-study reports to not only analyze the outcomes assessment efforts but also use assessment results to improve programs. Also, foundations and corporations who donate money to support business communications programs more frequently request evidence that their funds are well used and that, in fact, students are learning.

At my university, we have a multi-course Communications Skills program that is required to develop multiple-measure assessments. One part of the assessment is to measure student achievement at the end of Communications Skills V, a university-wide business communications course that is also end of a five-course integrated skills sequence. In each course we assess student achievement in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Past results show that student writing needs to improve, yet the average grade in the course is A-. We asked ourselves whether students are really meeting course standards to produce work that is "workplace ready." Are our standards rigorous enough? Initially, we adopted a policy that each student must pass the writing component to pass the course, and that student writing, which is collected in a portfolio, will be assessed by second readers to see if students are meeting course exit standards.

Several problems arose: First, the decision to use second readers made the faculty nervous ("you're second-guessing me"). Second, we had to decide what and how much to assess in a course that requires group reports, PowerPoint presentations, letters, memos, and case studies. Third, we had to calibrate scoring to ensure consistent ratings.

I will discuss the process we developed to address these problems and our tentative solutions. I will also share results of Spring 2002 portfolio assessment and how we are using them to improve the program. Finally, I will provide handouts of the exit standards and rubrics we used, and so that ABC members may adapt them to their home institutions.

The Assessment and Results

The purpose of the portfolio assessment rating session was to assess student outcomes to learn how effective our instruction is and to base program improvement on the results. On Saturday, April 20, 2002, 12 full- and part-faculty who teach CO230 Communications Skills V performed a criterion-referenced assessment of 417 portfolios of CO230 Communications Skills V students.

Each portfolio had two objective readers, and to ensure validity, no instructor was allowed to rate his or her students. The portfolios contained edited pieces of business communications—a cover letter and résumé, a letter or memo—and printouts of six PowerPoint slides. CO230 faculty created the rating rubrics, based on course goals and practices. Faculty shared the rubrics with their students beforehand so that students knew how they were being assessed and that assessment was to be taken seriously.

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(Attached are the rating procedures, a list of items rated, and the rubrics of rating standards by which each portfolio was judged.)

Analysis and Comments

The CO230 faculty in a series of meetings between January and March 2002 defined the goals and items to be tested and then created appropriate rubrics (attached). One result of the meetings is the sense that all of the instructors understand the goals and criteria for assessment and are able to convey them to their students. This collaboration, an important social dimension of improvement, is bringing more coherence to the CSP by raising faculty awareness of program goals and helping them to focus on criteria in courses.

On the day of the ratings, the faculty scored 417 portfolios, 18 of which were incomplete and could not be given a final rating. Of the ones rated, 105 were exemplary, 285 were proficient, and 9 did not meet standards. (See table below). Of the 462 students enrolled in CO230, 45 did not submit portfolios.

Michael Schmoker (1996) in *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement.* (Alexandria, VA: Assoc of School and Curriculum Development) writes that the "combination of three concepts constitutes the foundation for results:

- Meaningful teamwork
- Clear, measurable goals, and
- Regular collection and analysis of performance data (2)."

The ongoing assessment of the Communications Skills Program contains all three elements, and is leading to useful results. In the Spring 2002 Term, student outcomes have been assessed through CO230 portfolio assessment and objective testing (a follow-up test of all CO230 students who were originally tested in December 2000 with the same objective test).

Conclusion

The results suggest that the Communications Skills Program Courses I-V is achieving designated student outcomes basic PowerPoint design and production of cover letters, résumés, and memos. We should expect a high proficiency rate in CO230 since students have completed CO120-221. Some transfer students may be less proficient, but, in any event, they have to take CO221. CO230 students demonstrated that nearly 94 percent of them are exemplary or proficient in their abilities to write basic business communications that employers value.

SUMMARY OF CO230 PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT RESULTS, SPRING 2002

Total Portfolios Scored	417		
Total CO230 Enrollment	462		
No Submissions	45	10%	of 462
Portfolios Scored	417	90%	of 462
SCORES (6 highest-1 lowest)	Total	% of 417	
Scores of 6 (Highest)	6	1.4%	
Exemplary (5.9-5)	99	23.7%	
Proficient (4-3)	285	68.3%	
Does Not Meet Standard (2-0)	9	2.1%	
Incomplete Submissions	18	4.3%	
		100%	

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Contents of Portfolio

1.COVER LETTER AND RÉSUMÉ
Assignment: The students will create a written résumé and cover letter that follows the specified guidelines established from the text and the course presentation formats shared from Career Service. The student's including the advertisement/description of job for which he or she is applying is optional.
Evaluation: The cover letter and résumé will be evaluated using a rubric that focuses on correctness of form and style, grammar and syntax, diction, etc.

2.MEMO/LETTER "Why I Deserve to be Promoted: An Assessment of My Communication Skills" (must address writing, speaking. listening, and reading and research and critical thinking/problem solving skills. The student may submit in a letter or memo format that observes accepted business conventions.
Assignment: The students will compose a metacognitive essay expressing specific strengths and weaknesses in the four communication strands (*reading, writing, listening*, and *speaking*).
Evaluation: The essay will be evaluated in terms of content (student comments relative to specific strengths and weaknesses) and mechanics of effective writing using a specific rubric for writing.

3. PPT SLIDES (5) from any assignment with printouts in handouts and in notes pages.
Assignment: The students will create a basic PowerPoint 2000 presentation that includes minimally a title slide and slides that demonstrate a variety of PPT strategies such as bulleted lists, graphics (optional), and a pleasing layout. The slides should have no major grammatical or mechanical errors. An introductory slide is optional.
Evaluation: The PPT presentation will be evaluated based on a *rubric* focusing on appropriateness of form and style, grammar and syntax, spelling, and other specified performance criteria as outlined in the Lehman, *Creating Dynamic Multimedia Presentations* text.

Dates and Procedures
Students turn in their final work for assessment by the last Friday of class (April 19) before final week. That Saturday, April 20, we have an all-day assessment (8 AM-5 PM); a continental breakfast and lunch will be provided. Each portfolio gets two readers excluding the instructor. Readers are volunteers and will be compensated. We will do holistic scoring, and keep what we rate simple because there are 23 sections of CO230 with 472 students.

3 Ratings: Exemplary, Proficient, Does Not Meet Standard

Description of Rating Procedures for the Day

Twelve Raters scored 417 portfolios between 8:30 AM and 2:00 PM.

Faculty were asked to be thoroughly conversant with the rubrics before they came to the session.

At 8:00 AM, raters organized the folders into three groups. We assigned folders randomly, cautioning raters not to rate students from their own sections.

At 8:30 AM rating began. First readers pulled portfolios at random from their assigned alpha-piles, being careful not to rate students they're currently teaching or whose work they might not be able to rate objectively.

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Each reader assigned a holistic score (1-6) to each of the three components and an overall holistic score for the portfolio.

The first reader wrote all four scores on the back of the folder. The folder is then placed in a "Second Readers" pile on the table.

A second reader took portfolios at random from the "Second Readers" pile, being careful to avoid both portfolios for his/her current students and portfolios that he/she has already rated. The reader must check to see whether the holistic score for the portfolio (not the subscores) he/she has assigned is roughly the same as that assigned by the first reader. If it is, the folder was "Completed" and given to Tom Marshall for recording the scores on an alpha list of all CO230 students. If it is not, the folder goes onto a "Resolutions" pile for a third reading.

Since there few folders during the day in the "Resolutions" pile, no impromptu calibrations were needed to address different standards that raters were using to assess student materials.

A third reader took portfolios from the "Resolutions" pile and re-scored, recording the score on the back of the folder. In fact, fewer than ten portfolios had to be rescored.

At noon, there was an hour lunch break. All scoring was completed by 2:00 PM.

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RUBRICS USED IN PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT
Cover Letter & Résumé

Résumé and Cover Letter	Exemplary (6-5 points)	Proficient (4-3 points)	Does Not Meet Standard (2-0 points)	Rating
Résumé Heading	Lists all necessary contact data: name, address, telephone number	Lists all necessary contact data	Omits key contact data	
Résumé Objective, if listed	Lists specific job objective with appropriate keywords	Lists general objective appropriate for job sought	Poor objective or inappropriate for targeted position	
Résumé Education	Lists all necessary data: Name of degree, date of graduation, & institution. Lists major & GPA.	Lists all necessary data	Omits key data or listing is unclear	
Résumé Work or Relevant Experience	Itemizes jobs, most recent first. Lists most significant job title, employer and city, & dates of employment (month, year)	Lists most necessary data	Omits key data or data is out of proper order.	
Résumé Description of Work or Relevant Experience	Uses appropriate action verbs and parallel structure to describe skills and summarize achievements, which are also quantified. Gives evidence of communication, management, and interpersonal talents.	Uses appropriate action verbs and parallel structure; may not quantify all achievements; provides some evidence of talents	Omits description; does not use action verbs or parallel structure; includes irrelevant data	
Résumé Special Skills, Achievements, Awards, if applicable	Highlights computer skills, offers evidence of being well-rounded individual by listing awards, experiences, and extracurricular activities.	Lists most necessary data	Poorly organized, includes irrelevant data such as personal information	
Audience of Résumé and Cover Letter	In workplace terms, it is ready to send out to external audiences or to higher ups "as is."	With minor revisions, is ready for external audiences	Exhibits little or no sense of audience.	
Organization and Layout of Résumé and Cover Letter	The layout is aesthetically pleasing and contributes to the overall message with appropriate use of headings and subheadings and white space.	The layout uses horizontal and vertical white space appropriately.	The layout is cluttered, confusing, and does not use spacing, headings and subheadings to enhance the readability.	
Conventions of Résumé and Cover Letter	Conforms to business letter and résumé format.	Conforms to business letter and résumé format with minor revision.	Does not conform to business letter and résumé format	
Mechanics of Résumé and Cover Letter	The text is written with no errors in grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.	The text is clearly written with little or no editing required for grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, usage and grammar repeatedly distract the reader and major editing and revision is required.	

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Memo/Letter Rubric

Memo/ Letter	Exemplary (6-5 points)	Proficient (4-3 points)	Does Not Meet Standard (2-0 points)	Rating
Introduction	The introduction presents the main idea and draws the audience into the presentation with compelling questions or by relating to the audience's interests or goals.	The introduction is clear and coherent and relates to the topic.	The introduction does not orient the audience to what will follow. The sequencing is unclear and does not appear interesting or relevant to the audience.	
Content	The content is written clearly and concisely with a logical progression of ideas and supporting information.	The content is written with a logical progression of ideas and supporting information.	The content lacks a clear point of view and logical sequence of information. Includes little persuasive information and only one or two facts about the topic. Sequencing of ideas is unclear.	
Audience	Appeals persuasively to values, capabilities, self-perceptions of primary audience.	Frames message in ways that reflect likely values, capabilities, constraints of primary audience.	Ignores audience values and constraints; shows no or little sense of audience.	
Layout and Business Format	The layout is aesthetically pleasing and contributes to the overall message with appropriate use of headings and subheadings and white space. Format follows business/memo conventions	The layout uses horizontal and vertical white space appropriately. Format follows business/memo conventions but needs minor revisions	The layout is cluttered, confusing, and does not use spacing, headings and subheadings to enhance the readability. Format shows little or no awareness of business conventions	
Writing Mechanics	The text is written with no errors in grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.	The text is clearly written with little or no editing required for grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, usage and grammar repeatedly distract the reader and major editing and revision is required. (more than 5 errors)	
Composite Rating: 6-5 (Exemplary) 4-3 (Proficient) 2-1 (Does Not Meet Standard)			**TOTAL POINTS**	

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PowerPoint Rubric (Part 1)

PowerPoint Slides	Exemplary (6-5 points)	Proficient (4-3 points)	Does Not Meet Standard (2-0 points)	Points
Introduction (optional)	The introduction presents the overall topic and draws the audience into the presentation with compelling questions or by relating to the audience's interests or goals.	The introduction is clear and coherent and relates to the topic.	The introduction does not orient the audience to what will follow. The sequencing is unclear and does not appear interesting or relevant to the audience.	
Content	The content is written clearly and concisely with a logical progression of ideas and supporting information. The project includes motivating questions and advanced organizers that provide the audience with sense of the project's main idea.	The content is written with a logical progression of ideas and supporting information.	The content lacks a clear point of view and logical sequence of information. Information is incomplete, out of date and/or incorrect. Sequencing of ideas is unclear.	
Text Elements	The fonts are easy-to-read and point size varies appropriately for headings and text. Use of italics, bold, and indentations enhances readability. Text is appropriate in length for the target audience and to the point. The background and colors enhance the readability of text.	Sometimes the fonts are easy-to-read, but in a few places the use of fonts, italics, bold, long paragraphs, color or busy background detracts and does not enhance readability.	The text is extremely difficult to read with long blocks of text and small point size of fonts, inappropriate contrasting colors, poor use of headings, subheadings, indentations, or bold formatting. Slides are crowded (exceed 8x8+)	
Layout	The layout is aesthetically pleasing and contributes to the overall message with appropriate use of headings and subheadings and white space.	The layout uses horizontal and vertical white space appropriately.	The layout is cluttered, confusing, and does not use spacing, headings and subheadings to enhance the readability.	

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PowerPoint Rubric (Part 2)

PowerPoint Slides	Exemplary (6-5 points)	Proficient (4-3 points)	Does Not Meet Standard (2-0 points)	Points
Graphics (optional)	The graphics assist in presenting an overall theme and make visual connections that enhance understanding of concept, ideas and relationships. Original images are created using proper size and resolution, and all images enhance the content. There is a consistent visual theme.	The graphics visually depict material and assist the audience in understanding the flow of information or content. Original images are used. Images are proper size, resolution.	The graphics are unrelated to the content. Graphics do not enhance understanding of the content, or are distracting decorations that create a busy feeling and detract from the content.	
Writing Mechanics	The text is written with no errors in grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.	The text is clearly written with little or no editing required for grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, usage and grammar repeatedly distract the reader and major editing and revision is required. (more than 5 errors)	
Composite Rating: 6-5 (Exemplary) 4-3 (Proficient) 2-1 (Does Not Meet Standard)			**TOTAL POINTS**	

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Title: **How Do We Know We're Doing It Right? Assessing Outcomes in Core Business Communications Courses.** A Presentation for the 67th Annual Convention of Association for Business Communication.
Author(s): Thomas A. Marshall
Corporate Source: / Publication Date: [illegible] 2003

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